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TEACHING CHILDREN'S WRITING IN ENGLAND.

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PREPARING CHILDREN TO WRITE BY TAKING THEM OUT OF THE CLASSROOM TO SHARE EXPERIENCES IS A RESPECTED PRACTICE IN SOME ENGLISH PRIMARY SCHOOLS. SINCE A TEACHER CANNOT PREDICT WITH CERTAINTY WHEN A CHILD WILL BE READY FOR WRITTEN EXPRESSION, HE MUST REPEATEDLY ENCOURAGE THE CHILD TO SHARE, TO TALK OVER, AND LATER--WHEN THE MOMENT OF EXPRESSION ARRIVES--TO DRAW, PAINT, WORK WITH MATERIALS, OR WRITE. SUCH PRELIMINARIES ARE IMPORTANT BECAUSE (1) WRITING IS ONLY ONE SEGMENT OF NUMEROUS INTEGRATED ACTIVITIES IN THE SCHOOLS, (2) SPOKEN, NOT WRITTEN, LANGUAGE GIVES CHILDREN THEIR FIRST OPPORTUNITIES TO COMPARE LANGUAGE WITH EXPERIENCE, AND (3) THE LONELY ACT OF WRITING CAN BE FACED ONLY WHEN CHILDREN HAVE BUILT UP THE EXPECTATION OF AN INTERESTED, SYMPATHETIC LISTENER. AT THE CHILD'S INITIAL STAGE OF UTILIZING WRITTEN EXPRESSION, WRITING IS VERY MUCH A MATRIX OF INTERWOVEN FEELINGS, IMPRESSIONS, OBSERVATIONS, AND THOUGHTS. INSTEAD OF ENCOURAGING CHILDREN TO DISTINGUISH UTILITARIAN FROM IMAGINATIVE USES OF LANGUAGE, THEY SHOULD BE LED TO RECOGNIZE THE VALUE OF WRITING BOTH AS A MEDIUM AND AS A TOOL OF EXPRESSION, IN THAT (1) BEING PERMANENT, IT CAN HELP ONE COLLECT A STORE OF THINGS WORTH REMEMBERING, (2) BEING SLOWER THAN TALKING, IT ENCOURAGES ONE TO REFLECT, PONDER, AND MAKE DISCOVERIES ABOUT EXPERIENCE, AND (3) BEING PRIVATE, IT ENHANCES ONE'S OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPERIMENT WITH LANGUAGE. (THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE 1967 NCTE ANNUAL CONVENTION.) (RD)

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NEW DIRECTIONS IN COMPOSITION

"Teaching Children's Writing in England" . . . John Dixon

PREAMBLE

I won't pretend to a sort of god-like view of the 15,000 Primary Schools. I am going to talk about a minority tradition that all respect and many of us would now like to emulate. To be concrete I went to three teachers who represented that tradition in my view, talked over with them their written work and its context in the class's other activities, and chose with them examples not of the best writing but of pieces that represented a step forward in the growth of an individual child. If this talk has any value then, it is due to three West Riding teachers--Mrs. Marjorie Lawton, Miss Nancy Martin and Mrs. Mary Turner. Their pupils come from an upland mill village, Birdsedge--the name suggests its perch on the rim of the moors; a mining village, Netherton; and a council estate in a thickly populated mining district around Castleford. Most of them are the child of manual workers.

1. Shall we begin by recalling the central purposes that underlie writing.

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The Donkey, by Joyce aged 9

> Up i go onto the donkey there is the saddle upon its back, shiny and slippy. Away i go up and down. "Bump Bump Bumpety Bump
> Its ears stick up sharp. Fury body rubbing against my legs,
> Warm comfy. Donkey breathing heavily like a steam engine.
> Clip-clop its hoofs hard, browny colour they are making a dent in the fine sandy soil. Now faster and faster i go jigging up and down, "left right its sturdy legs kicking all the time.
> Its tail waggling "Whish backwards and forwards.

If like Joyce we are not so confident in writing, there has to be a

special urge, a special relationship to what we write about. Here, I think you'll agree, Joyce is <u>celebrating</u> an experience, recalling it with satisfaction in every detail. As we read, the donkey is not an external object that we are gazing at with curiosity. It is part of the on-going experience we feel. The rhythm and movement of the language suggests and recalls our movement as we Bump Bumpety Bump. There are his sensations (breathing heavily like a steam engine) and there are our sensations (furry body rubbing against my legs, warm comfy). What fun! When you think about it, what a miraculous use of language.

2. Such writing keeps on emerging like a lucky chance. But it implies a background, a context of talk and observations and shared experience. Looking from outside one can guess that this child was able to draw on regular experience in school of expressive movement work, and of listening and responding to rhythmical poetry and prose, writing is the part of an iceberg that glitters above the sea's surface. Below the surface in the private act of writing a child works intuitively to draw together diverse and varied fragments of learning. As Mrs. Turner said, despite all her experience the teacher can never predict with certainty when the time for writing has come. But the recurring invitation to share an experience, to talk it over together, and later maybe to choose writing, or drawing and painting, or working with materials, leaves room for the lucky chance to emerge.

3. I emphasize this background for three reasons. First, a discussion of <u>writing</u> in these primary schools is in effect isolating one segment

from the flow of activities that integrate with it. Second, in the course of that flow it is not written language but spoken that gives the children their first opportunity to set language against an experience and see how the two fit together. And third, children can only face the lonely act of writing when they have built up the expectation of an interested, sympathetic listener: I think it was no accident that all three teachers were notably free to enter into a dialogue - to draw on their own experience and engage with that of another person.

4. I am speaking of a tradition then where the teachers frequently leave the classroom, taking the children out to share an experience. It may be just a walk to a well-known place - a local wood towards dusk on a wintry evening - or it may be a special visit to see a power station, or a mill warehouse that burned down a few days before. The teacher is looking for interests, perceptions, questions and observations to emerge, and in exchange she will offer some of her own. Back in the classroom she must decide how to carry the learning forward: are the class tired and relaxed, wanting to browse through books perhaps, or is this the moment to offer a choice of media - paint, pen & ink, clay....? One can never be sure, and it is a good thing to mention here the times when writing doesn't work, when the experience wasn't so exciting to them as it was to us, or the occasion for writing didn't seem timely. I didn't bring the writing today. Instead I brought some that suggests what the children can bring back and build on after such visits.

5. Derek (age 9) went to the power station. On March 4th he wrote a

letter thanking the guides:

> Dear sir,
> Will you please thank the guides who took us round the power station and thank him for being so patient with us. And Thank him for telling us every thing we whanted to know. I am so great full because he did us a great deed. Will you please thank them. I did not think it would be that great in size. You did us a great favour, I also whanted to thank you for the drink and the Biscuts. I am so honured at your hospitlaly I thank you once again

It is a difficult task, isn't it, to imagine that distant sir and to think of the way you would speak to him, supposing you dared? There is a proper way to do it: "Will you please thank" sounds right, and "I am so grateful". How about "I am so honoured"? Adults as well as children can have difficulty with this kind of writing and its special "register" of vocabulary and sentence structures. Occasionally Derek flounders, but at this stage ought we not to look at such writing for what is mastered, not for what is lacking.

The next day, Derek did a much longer piece called "Writing on the Power Station". Let us look at the opening paragraph:

> First of all the coal comes down the river in the tom puctings barges. When it reaches the bank of the power station it is in nuts that is the little lumps of coal There is a conva belt waiting to take it to the grinding mills and then it is blown up a pipe to the bolers. The Grinding mills ground it into dust before it went up the pipe to the boiler, This is who it looks

(Remember that in Yorkshire the boy says "hoo" so it is hard for him to write how.)

It is much more easy to keep the audience in mind now, nay to

attend carefully to the ones who will not understand "nuts" and "grinding mills" and such things that anyone brought up on the coal-field would probably know. There is a sense of competence here, of wanting to explain and being able to.

On the next day Derek wrote a piece called "Pipes":

> Thicks and thins they go.
> Twisting and curling.
> Entangling interlocking spirlling in the air.
> Meandering, Swerving, Bending, everywhere,
> Going through the gloomy ground to the houses far away
> Then a twisting curling turn to come home once again,
> Here he is with his friends still Meandering in the air,
> Never seem to know their way but But always succeeds in every way

(Below he draws the curling, interlocking, entangled pattern of the pipes - each adjective is needed.)

This piece calls for a quality of involvement that the others don't demand. The language too is difficult to control, but the difficulty is not that of the letter with its repertoire of adult phrases. On the contrary, in this piece the writer is on his own, improvising, trying to find the exact word, phrasing, rhythm, balance... He is taking the reader and himself into a personal world, into part of an experience that is felt to be uniquely his - not felt to be public and impersonal like the passage of the coal from barge to boiler. It is this level of perception and language which, as a teacher commented, is often sifted out if a pause of a day or two is left between the experience and the invitation to probe deeper.

6. To try and look closer at this last variety of writing, I want to turn

from the individual to the group, in this case a goup of 27 children aged 7 - 11 from a two teacher school who went to see the burnt-out mill warehouse and returned to write and paint. Does a common experience merely produce a common voice? Let's start with David S., aged 7.

No Good

There's nothing that remains,
   The house was all in flames.
The rags are all scorched,
   And nobody thought.
What to do with the remains.
   Nobody did any thinking,
What to do with the building,
   Is'nt it a shame.

Writing like this is a process of finding out. We don't know, when we start, where we shall end up. So it's a help to a young child to have the support of a familiar form - in this case, I should guess, the form of a playground rhyme. On the other hand, David had to find that form: Miss Smith could not <u>tell</u> him it was appropriate to what he had in mind. The form draws together a pattern of associations already half-felt, and it promotes others. Nothing..... nobody.....nobody. Remains.. flames.. the remains.. a shame.
If we say these words slowly, at the pace of a child's writing their sound reinforces and extends the common sense of their meaning. The feeling of dismay, perhaps, and of mourning a loss, comes through such patterns. This piece reminds us that it is important to look beyond the prosaic meaning and that reading a poem aloud may help the writer to discover things he had not fully realised were there.

The next piece is by David Y., who was 8 years old. Again an

intuitive pattern has been found, but this time in a sequence of abrupt, vivid, inter-related images.

The century old building.

The roof collapsed lik a plant dying. The crunchy wood breaking when the firemen came rushing lik the flames. All rags are hanging out of the windows which were scorched and the firemen had a burst pipe and they had to turn the main off.

When I talked this over with Miss Smith, we both felt that the tension suggested by the early images had been lost by the end - the writer had "gone into reporting". Reading it again, I was not sure. Cutting off the <u>main</u> - the last hope for the building - could be a powerful and appropriate ending. I often wonder how much of my pupils' imaginative effort passes unnoticed.

The third David in the class, David M., was 9 years old and, as it happens, his writing suggests very clearly to me a child who is a step nearer to maturity. I wonder what you think.

The Useless Remains

Two days after the fire all that was left was an old skeleton, a burntdown building. The metalwork was twisted and bent, the wooden beams were charred and when you crushed the bits they turned into sooty flake. Ragged, wrecked, just as though some unknown giant beast had been gnawing at the roof. Just like a rodent gnaws at a piece of wood. The smoke from smouldering rags is choking you. This is a creepy place. No wood in the door, no glass in the windows, only the skeleton left. There is something there that had not been there before; light above you. Useless old building, I'm glad I was not in you during the fire.

Of course we cannot prove that the younger Davids <u>could</u> not write

like this too. But they chose not to. The difference I sense can be summed up as articulation - coherence - control. The younger children seem to be more immersed in their world, less able to detach themselves and bring it to order. This is part of the beauty of their writing and in no sense a failure. Growth implies both keeping that sense of immersion, as Derek does in his writing about pipes I think, and also being able to move out from it at times. So David M. does detach himself on this occasion: "useless old building, I'm glad I was not in you during the fire". And from the start his building is seen from a specific point of view "two days after the fire". But alongside the dispassionate observation of "when you crushed the bits they fell into sooty flake" we still find a hint of awe -"sole unknown giant beast had been gnawing".

7. Finally from this group, an 11 year-old, Peter.

The Fire!

As I looked at the old mill I wondered what it would be like if I were that mill, sitting in solitude without sympathy. Oh, howlonely that old, burnt out mill must be, wrapped, in deathly silence with the crumbled mass of stone and wood and twisted and slashed metalwork.
As you look the cold, fevery sound of creaking timber is shattering the horrible silence which covers the loud shattering noise of the cars and lorries passing in the distance. Oh how I hate to see the dead skeleton of a ghostly place hoping for renewal. As you look at it you wish you were far, far away. The straggling girders are now lying around like meat of a dead animal, after being attacked by a lit up enemy. As you look at it, it looks like a whole lot of rocking-horses. Then you see charred wood strewn all around. The deathly silence is suddenly torpedoed by chirping and twittering birds which are still wondering how it all happened. Thier nests gutted like the old mill itself.
Oh how terrible it must be to have no home. All the chippings are all over the ground with long and terribly crooked beams.
As I look, the birds are looking too at their roasted eggs laying terribly scarred and smashed after the fiery flames of death.

A new stage of self-consciousness has been reached - "As I looked at the old mill I wondered..." - a self awareness that extends to the language being used. This brings new power but it brings new difficulties. There is a temptation to take one's attention off the object - the experience - and to focus on the way the words are working. This focussing on the words can be in the interests of charging them with new appropriateness to the experience, but it can also be a way of building a "sensational" world that is quite separate from reality - as we know in the Sunday papers. Miss Smith felt that "the birds.. looking too at their roasted eggs laying terribly scarred and smashed after the fiery flames of death" was a piece of such sensationalism, and I agree.

8. Now this use of language was once rather a puzzle to me, and maybe it is to you. We enjoy it - we think "how effective, how clever, in a sense how <u>imaginative</u>". So that sometimes I have heard precisely this kind of writing called creative. But we don't say "how true; I can imagine that, yes, life <u>is</u> like that - that's me", and I would prefer to keep the word creative for the occasions when those phrases apply. I think it was with this distinction in mind that several British participants at the Dartmouth Seminar shuddered occasionally at the way the word "rhetoric" was so freely used.

9. An attention to language after the event of writing, such as we ourselves have been paying here, reveals unsuspected patterns, purposes and perceptions in children's language. So it may be argued that before the event, a discussion of such patterns, etc., drawing attention to the language potentially available, would inevitably be valuable. I doubt it. Consider the four pieces from this class. Though

there are common elements, each has something individual to say. I never have the feeling that other people's words and phrases are being taken up. No, on the contrary, I would assume that the talk which preceded this writing encouraged each individual to focus on the <u>experience as he or she had found it</u>. Thus even Peter's tendency to focus on language is a personal choice, not a decision imposed on the class by the teacher.

10. Of course, it is very easy for us teachers to induce such a switch of focus. Sensitive to the need for a growth in vocabulary during these vital years, we teachers react with pleasure to newly-discovered words. So the child, seeing our pleasure, tries to feed it. If in addition he is not too sure of himself in writing, a child without the courage quite to be <u>himself</u> may find it easier to offer something <u>acceptable</u> instead. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish between the effort to fit a new word to an experience and the effort to please teacher. Here is Irwin, for instance, drawing a panoramic view of Castleford:

A panoramic view,
Of browns and dull reds.
Vague.
Shruken figures,
Seem to creep,
Through the streets,
Like snails.

A screen of mist,
Seems to cover,
The grotesque buildings.
Smoke,
Billows,
Out of the seemingly small,
Factory chimneys.

Rows and rows,
Of numerous houses.
Covered
In filth.
Which come from the dirty
Grimy factorys.

One has to be very aware - and honest with oneself - as a teacher to realise, as Mrs. Turner said to me, that a nervous boy like Irwin, who wants to be "good", may deliberately use a word that will elicit the praise he needs. But sometimes the desire to satisfy a generalised adult audience (and not just the teacher) is only too obvious. Mrs. Lawton and I looked at a healthy pile of written work by Georgina, of which this is a representative piece.

TO THE DEPTHS OF THE OCEAN

As the storm raged above, below in the depths of the ocean all was calm and on an emerald rock a mergirl sat spinning.

On the surface white sea horses raged and bellowed and the angry waves dashed up the shore, but on the calm ocean bed the spent lights shone and the rainbow corals glistened and the tiny sea creatures opened and shut and the tiny fish darted from one shell to another.

The feeling for rhythm and for a general sensuous quality in language seems mature for a 9 to 10 year old, and one can't help admiring it, though as Mrs. Lawton says, if much of a child's writing is like this, one feels uneasy too. The emerald rock....the mermaid singing... white sea horses raging and bellowing...spent lights shining...the rainbow corals...the tiny sea creatures are like delicately selected items from a range of literary stock. As a language game it is great fun. And this, I think, is how we treat it in class. At the same time we need to offer literary children like Georgina extra encouragement when they focus however briefly on experience rather than language. Mrs. Lawton felt the change in an extract like this.

The Rose

> As soon as I saw my rose I was enchanted by its fragrance and colour and shape. It was as soft as velvet, and the colour like a deep ruby. The stem was slender and delicate like the petals. In the center of the flower was the stamens. When you unrolled a petal it threw itself back into shape.

11. In the writing I have discussed so far, we have looked mainly at children - with a matrix of common experience - finding something personal to explore in the act of writing. Writing was helping each child to involve himself again in a recent experience and to realise some of its meaning for him. There are a number of reasons why I would put such writing foremost and central in today's discussion. First, writing is permanent and can help us build up a store of things worth remembering - and even treasuring - as our first extract by Joyce reminded us. Second, writing being a private activity and so much slower than talk, it can encourage us to reflect, ponder and make discoveries about experience. Third, because the act of writing leaves us along with language, it enables us to become aware of new possibilities in fitting language to our experience.

12. When we use writing for some or all of these three purposes, we are making the most of it you might say. Of course, this is not to deny that writing is used for simpler and more utilitarian purposes, as we saw in Derek's letter of thanks, and for the sake of playing with language, as Peter and Georgina may have been doing at times. But what I should like to do here is to reverse an attitude to writing in which my generation were brought up, according to which writing for simplified purposes was the staple diet and "imaginative" writing the occasional cream puff. In my view something like the

contrary is true. Writing that fulfils my first three purposes is a healthy diet that can make an important contribution to personal growth. I distrust a staple diet of untilitarian writing, because I have seen its effects on more than one generation of children. But here I should be more specific, because the writing I have called utilitarian includes at least two broad types. In the first of these, with formal letters as a good example, our attention is focussed on certain social conventions in the language and the fitting of ready-made units into an appropriate pattern. In the second, of which Derek's explanation of the processing of coal is a good example, it is the rational order of events or ideas that demands our attention, together with the need for adequate explicitness about what we are describing. Whereas the letter is of marginal interest at this age, the demand for rational ordering is frequently going to be met. But will it be met entirely on its own, divorced from the three purposes I proposed?

13. In discussing the difficulty some children have in writing even a story, Mrs. Lawton turned to a piece by a slower learner who on this occasion, she felt, has succeeded well beyond expectation.

Making bread: What we did

> First we put the salt and flour in a big bowl and then stirred it up with a knife then we put some yeast in a cup and stirred it up and then suddenly it whent liquefyed then we scraped the yeast out of the cup and in to the big flour bowl and mixed them both together. Then we all had a go at stirring it then when we had done that we went round kneading it that means pulling the outside to the inside it was resilient and elastic when you look at it (it) is like putty I liked doing the kneading part where you had to put your hands in flour and pass the white pot bowl round the people had nearly all gone. The dough would strecth along way before it broke in two.

It is not by accident I think that the child conveys the charm of the experience for her, the interest she found, (and finally the sense of achievement in something she had made). The actions are there in the right order - I trust - and Carol (age 10) concludes by noting that the loaves were put in the oven at 450 degrees and it took the bread 45 minutes to bake. So much for utility. But the experience offered something more - something that may well have provided the drive for so extended and, by her standards, so careful a piece of writing. "I liked doing the kneading part"! she says. And at that point there is a closer description of what went on than some of the more competent girls in the group were to offer. Of course, from a utilitarian point of view it is superfluous. But then, on a strict utilitarian calculus there is no point in a child writing down what already exists in plenty of recipe books. I have a feeling that intuitively Carol was quite right in choosing what it was appropriate to put on record <u>in this context</u>. She was not merely writing a recipe, she was partly recalling a success in "what we did", putting down the details as carefully as she had carried out the operations, and partly recalling an enjoyment in what went on. The two motives are fused.

14. Now, from the point of view of learning in general, isn't this what teachers are always seeking? - a fusion between 'what we like doing' and 'what we need to know'. If this is so, one should not be surprised to see the fusion of motives entering into the writing, as they did in all three schools and in a wide variety of ways.

Here for instance is Neil (aged 7) writing on Nights:

Nights

We'll fight for it said the king. Right we'll fight for it said the man who came from the next country. We'll fight for my country said the king. Now count your men and your horses. How many have you got 60 men and 60 horses. We have got 80 men and eighty horses. You need 20 men and 20 horses more then we will have eight men and horses. We will fight at dawn to morrow. All right said the king we'll fight to morrow at dawn right. Soon it was coming near to dawn. Soon it strook dawn and the king got up and called his men and started to fight. Soon a great battle was going on with hundred and sixty men 80 on the kingside and 80 on the other side.

When you get to school, you know about fighting, you know about sides, and - a matter of pride - you know about huge numbers; it is all epic stuff in the eyes of Neil. For he hasn't learnt to see that number is part of a dispassionate world removed from our interests and desires. Instead, picking sides and being fair means being absolutely correct about what equals what.

16. It is curious that even in their fantasy world children often want to be exact. But it is true. Older children than Neil will spend a lot of time getting a model to scale, thinking out the exact detail, accreting bit by bit the things that will bring their robot, say, a step nearer reality (even though it will never reach it, and will stay a cardboard image). Here is Kevin (age 11) doing the same thing in writing

What I think My Park Will Be

My park would be two miles wide and four miles long. In one corner I have a large limestone building which is the indoor swimming pool which is 25 yards long and is heated. If you

have no swimming costume you can hire one which cost 2d per half hour. This building takes up 200 sq yds. Ten yards to your left is the ladies and gentlemens tiolet which (is) also heated. Their then is a vast area of grass which is cut every Sunday. There are not any playing apparatus on field exept an old car which is in perfect condishen and the engine taken out so the children can play in it. Their is a little stream that meanders it way from the hill which is 126 ft high and the opposite end to a large fish pond that covers 52 sq yds. The are 69 bridges on this 6 mls stream. Near the east railings is a station which has a diesel shunter with two carridges that carry 20 people on each. Further on is a slide which has an elavator to take you up the 35 ft high slide. The length you slide is 52 ft. which is 17 ft more than you climb. The part on which you slide is made of a 2" thick plate of aluminium. The large cabin in which you wait is made of 79 logs of cedar wood covered with golden plastic. Beside that is an eltar-skelter which is also elevated and is 66 ft straight up and you slide 118 ft before you reach the bottom. You will slide 32 ft more than the whole height. Each girders weighs 3 tns and their are 92 girder. This sum should give the supporting approx weight. The approx weight of support is 276 tons. This piece of apperatous cos 2,762 pounds. the whole park cost 701,602,023 pounds. The difference between the park and the cost of the shelter is 70,159,921 pounds. Next to that is the stream on which a barge takes you right round the park. At night the park is still open in the centre every night there is a circus that lasts for two hours. It is 30 ft high and covered 92 sq yds. In one corner there is a small national park in which roams every wild animal in Britain and spread about are several ponds and hills all this is mainly woodland with clearenses scattered about.....

17. Like Kevin, I could go on. But I hope to have clarified my earlier point that what exist in these schools are not two distinct kinds of writing, one imaginative and the other mundane; one personal, the other recording. Writing at this stage is still very much a matrix in which feelings, impressions, observations and thoughts lie interwoven. If we do encourage children at this stage to divorce a utilitarian kind of language from an imaginative, it may well not be in the interests of learning, I suggest. In particular it may prevent writing from being an activity in which children learn to project as exactly and fully as they can a reality which they are beginning to see and enjoy.

18. The experiences we started from today were environmental, but we have passed on through writing about a practical activity, to written fantasy and the borderland of planning. The survey is not complete, I ought to say; instead I have tried to define a central matrix - a central relationship of language to experience - from which other concerns and purposes may branch out. Within this matrix, I believe, a child learns to come to grips with experience through writing.

John Dixon
November 1967